

Alberta Doctors' Digest

The physician poet

If you're tired of:

- Jargon, gobbledegook and opinion masquerading as science.
- Hearing tired words like “resilient” and “sustainable.”
- Deciphering sentences like “Core beliefs and values” where “at the end of the day too many ongoing silos mean no quick fixes in terms of next generation granular metrics for implementation strategies.”

Or if the following phrases leave you cold:

- “Best practices for levels of optimization going forward.”
- “Synergizing for enhanced outcomes.”
- Other soul-destroying dead-speak.

Then why not try a little poetry to recharge your faith in language? It's a daily struggle ploughing through arid fields of decaying phrases mostly used to let the journalist, politician or bureaucrat avoid what he/she means, or make what he/she says sound meaningful or profound.

You can't get away with that in good poetry, although there's enough bad poetry to go around to satisfy masochists and bad poets who try to inject meaning into introverted, incomprehensible free verse doggerel.

There are so many different types of poetry – lyrical, narrative, dramatic, epic – written in different formats: sonnets (Spencerian, Miltonian or Shakespearian) odes, ballads, rondels, parodies, limericks, haiku, and many other forms including “borrowed gems” (which I like and unashamedly parody) using techniques of alliteration, onomatopoeia, bathos, tragedy, euphony, and humor. They are timed in metres with names derived from Greek, with stanzas (verses) rhymed, assonant, or grotesque (a la Ogden Nash) blank or free, set in couplets, quatrains, or sestets (a favorite of Robert Burns) and many other –ains and -ets. Enough, end this sentence!

In our struggle for a posthumous legacy, or at least to be remembered in passing, there's nothing quite like a good poem. And there are a lot of doctors who take up the quill and do quite well. Only a few of us reach the level of, say, William Carlos Williams, the American/Puerto Rican pediatrician and poet, but many manage to give birth to an elegant elegy, a sensitive sonnet, bold blank verse, a raucous rondel, a licentious limerick or even a hilarious haiku.

But the universal requirement is an emotional evocation of an image or an idea as in Williams' one sentence experimental: *The Red Wheelbarrow*:

“so much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens”

But I prefer the following:

I spread cold gel on a newborn chest
rest the probe on creamy skin, angle
between ribs, rotate to find a heart
no larger than the tiny fist
pushing me away...

A Cardiologist Seeks Certainty

– Denise Bundred

Winner of the Hippocrates Prize in Poetry and Medicine in 2016.

You can see so clearly that baby, can't you?

Not having been endowed with a superfluity of fine feelings, I do enjoy a bit of humor. Yet even Spike Milligan's *Sea Fever* (after John Masefield) evokes a clear image:

I must go down to the sea again,
To the lonely sea and the sky;
I left my shoes and socks there,
I wonder if they're dry.

I count the extraordinarily talented John Keats, the romantic poet, as a medical poet. Defrauded of a proper allowance on his father's death, he apprenticed to the surgeon Dr. Thomas Hammond. Since studying medicine required a university degree which he could not afford, and surgery did not, he apprenticed as a surgical “dresser” at Guy's Hospital, London. But he never practised, likely because he died of tuberculosis at the age of 25. In his short life he published only 54 poems – many becoming classics, e.g., *Ode to Autumn*:

“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, close-bosom friend of the maturing sun,” etc.

Learning poetry at school

We learned poetry by heart at school – and I'm grateful for that.

It's not done so much in schools now, this learning by heart, though my grand-daughter Alex tells me they analyze good poetry – like Burns and, to my surprise, Sylvia Plath.

We learned many poems with Mr. Doyle, an amiable middle-aged Irishman. His classes were run on The Doyle Principle. He said he was sorry, but in his experience the only way boys learned was by forcing in facts. He smiled when he said this, making you think he was quite nice, which most times he was. He was right to some extent. We had a substitute teacher when Doyle was off ill; we weren't wary of him and we learned nothing.

"Have you boys learned nothing while I've been away?" Mr. Doyle said, sort of pleased.

"Not very much, sir," we said.

"Well then," he said, "I suspect your teacher did not use the Doyle Principle."

The Doyle Principle was mainly "Excalibur Junior" – a cricket stump. He explained: "There are facts which the education council, in their wisdom, have deemed that you must know. My job is to teach you these facts so that you retain them. Boys do not like learning facts, except for a few swats. Most of you aren't swats. Most of you are lazy. Some of you are bone-idle. Despite various educational movements arguing against the Doyle Principle, I've found the only way to get facts into boys is to push them in. Ergo, the Doyle Principle. Several techniques fulfill the Doyle Principle. For example, the EIW technique."

"What's the EIW technique, sir?"

"Ah! EIW stands for Excalibur if Wrong. If I say EIW. after asking you to recite a verse of a poem you were meant to memorize or if you see the letters EIW chalked on the board beside a sum or a question, it means if you get it wrong, you get a light reminder, on the rear with Excalibur Junior."

And Mr. Doyle would chuckle in a friendly manner as if the whole thing had nothing personally to do with him. He was quite nice about all this. It was amazing how many poems we learned – and we sometimes analyzed them. Changed times.

Quoting the occasional couplet summing up a situation succinctly, say in a committee, is more satisfying than resorting to bureaucratese ("At the end of the day going forward, this arguably will be top of our agenda – though there are no easy fixes."). Instead, you could say:

"If it were done when 'tis done, then t'were well it were done quickly, or not at all. – from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

That's a good one to force action on a decision rather than the motion go for further study! Or from *Hamlet*:

"Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice" – a kind way to stop a loquacious committee member.

Or from Robert Frost: "Two Roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the road less travelled" – summarizing a hard decision.

This doesn't always work. I once recited a line from Tennyson's *Ulysses* only a few years ago when looking at a job in Ontario. On being asked what plans I might have, I replied: "Well, some work of noble note may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with gods ..." I got some odd looks and didn't get the job (not that I really wanted it).

Another useful couplet in these times of censorship and cancel culture is from Yeats' *The Second Coming*:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst,
Are full of passionate intensity.

Some of these rhymes embed with extraordinary tenacity. A lady with severe Alzheimer's stunned me with the following repost (after I had been a little dismissive to a rambling comment) – quoting Ella Wheeler Wilcox's 1906 verse in her *Poems of Sentiment*:

It's easy enough to be pleasant,
When life flows by like a song,
But the man worthwhile is the one who will smile,
When everything goes dead wrong.

Then there's comic verse, using a format usually from a well-known poem:

Poems I Like

By Dr. Alexander Paterson

To Hell with modern abstract crap – most of it boring, puzzling pap.
Posing as Poesie – self-conscious junk – ego smugness, narcissist bunk.
You read it, and think: "What does it mean?" To work it out would take an aeon.
Most poems now – they don't do rhyming - Go blathering on, no feel for timing.

Naming of Parts – I like that one: tough yet dreamy, cleaning a gun.

The Highwayman or *Joan Hunter Dunn*. Simple, visual, rhythmic fun.

Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner's* good. You quote some lines and set a mood.

Ogden Nash, the rhymer's *King* could squeeze a phrase and make it sing.

Naval battles, clever sonnets, the Spanish beaten or girls in bonnets.
Good to read are Keats and Yeats, surely both among the greats.
And *Ozymandias* by Percy Bysshe – lines as timeless as you could wish.
But best of all – the young man learns - the one and only Robert Burns.

Another example:

A Shooting Star

**From the up and coming Edmonton poet, Dr. John Boyd.
(Inspired by a talk by Chris Hadfield, Canadian astronaut)**

Up in the Space Lab around the world spinning
A cold airless outpost from this world so remote.
In that cramped cavity, deprived of gravity,
Forget Newton's Laws, here all is afloat.
Bold fearless astronauts toil and experiment,
Bouncing around in fetal enjoyment.
Difficult is eating, worse is excreting,
Toilets with suction a necessary employment.

Reclaimed are fluids, but solids are useless,
Stored in a sump on the ship's freezing skin.
Such waste is regarded as needing discarded,
Jettisoned off when full to the brim.
This aromatic boxful now hurtles down earthwards,
Descending fast at high sonic pace.
Now twisting and turning, in the atmosphere burning,
A blazing bright star 'cross the night sky we trace.

A life altering scene is writ in the heavens,
An omen perchance in this wonderous sighting.
Shooting star up above, for a lad and his love,
Foul becomes fair, young lovers uniting.
Entwined now the couple, their eyes brightly shining,
The message is simple, forever together.
Such heavenly signs, can alter our minds,
In love or romance, and maybe the weather!

I keep several anthologies of poetry by my bedside. And last thing at night, after a stressful day, what better than to read a poem to focus your thoughts on fresh images, graceful language and ideas. A favorite nightcap and soporific of course is WB Yeats *Lake Isle of Innisfree*:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade...

Why not try the greatest poem of all – *Dante's Divine Comedy*?

And why not give the quill a try. *Alberta Doctors' Digest* might publish it.

Editor's note: The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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